

gomery Voters League to promote black registration and voting. Registration efforts gathered steam after World War II, when black combat veterans like Hilliard Brooks came home with boosted confidence and self-esteem. They expected to be rewarded for fighting for freedom overseas with more freedom at home.

Nixon hammered away at a host of civil rights issues as president of both the Montgomery NAACP branch, which he helped found in the 1920s, and the state NAACP conference. Rufus Lewis, a mortician who had coached a championship Alabama State football team in the 1930s, made voter registration a single-minded crusade. In the late 1940s he established a night club called the Citizens Club to promote registering and voting among vets and other young people. No one could enter the club without proof of registration.

A handful of ministers too had battled racial injustice. In 1949 Solomon Seay sought redress without success for a young black woman raped by two white police officers—a common outrage in the segregationist South. After the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* he led a campaign to desegregate local schools. For several years, through 1952, Vernon Johns railed against segregation from the pulpit of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. One of his brash sermons helped inspire Burks to start the Women's Political Council.

Owing to friction among Negro leaders, like that between middle-class Lewis and working-class Nixon, and to resignation in the black community, but more because of monolithic resistance by the white elite, none of these reform efforts made much headway by the mid-1950s. Black leaders faced a sobering dilemma that would bedevil the freedom movement for years to come. They lacked political power and knew that they could not really change their circumstances until they were fully enfranchised. But electoral initiatives toward this end, vital for long-term progress, did not offer immediate solutions to their pressing problems.

Then came the lightning flash of Rosa Parks's auspicious "no."

Nixon, whom Parks had worked with for a dozen years in the NAACP and as his secretary in his union office, bailed her out of jail. To make sure there would be no problem, two liberal whites accompanied him: attorney Clifford Durr and his wife, Virginia Foster Durr, a

well-known activist, a leader of the antisegregation Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), a crusader against the discriminatory poll tax, and sister-in-law of Supreme Court justice and ex-Alabama senator Hugo Black, who had been an active member of the Ku Klux Klan during its heyday in the 1920s.

Virginia Durr, then fifty-two, had become close friends with Parks, who had sewn dresses for her four daughters when she had no money to buy new ones. In August 1955, the month of Emmett Till's killing, Durr had arranged a scholarship for Parks to attend a two-week workshop on school desegregation at the Highlander Folk School, in the Appalachian mountains of Tennessee. Union Theological Seminary graduate Myles Horton, born and bred in the region's poverty, started the school in 1932, the Depression bottom. He burned with desire to help poor people gain power to improve their lives. For twenty years Highlander had served as a training center for community activists and CIO labor organizers. Recently it had begun schooling southern activists for the civil rights struggle. Like a modern-day Socrates, Horton fired questions to workshop participants to help them find answers to social problems from their own experience, then taught them how to apply this method to develop grassroots leadership.

At the close of the August workshop, Horton asked participants what changes they hoped for in their far-flung southern communities. Parks said that she did not expect things to improve in Montgomery, where the Negroes were "timid and would not act" and "wouldn't stand together." Still, she was deeply stirred by her sojourn at the mountain retreat, experiencing Highlander, where whites and blacks talked, ate, square-danced, swam, and played volley ball together, as a microcosm of a racially integrated society.

"I found out for the first time in my adult life that this could be a unified society," she recalled, "that there was such a thing as people of differing races and backgrounds meeting together in workshops and living together in peace and harmony. I gained there strength to persevere in my work for freedom."⁴⁰

Now four months later Nixon and the Durrs returned with Parks from jail to her small apartment in a housing development on Cleveland Avenue, eventually renamed Rosa Parks Avenue. Rosa Parks

shared it with her husband, Raymond, and her ailing mother, a former schoolteacher who had wanted Rosa to teach. As they drank coffee, Nixon persuaded her, over her husband's diehard resistance, to use her arrest as the long-hoped-for test case to challenge the constitutionality of bus segregation. Raymond Parks, whose skin was so light he could pass for white, cut airmen's hair at integrated Maxwell Field Air Force base outside town. He was no stranger to activism, a longtime NAACP member who had served during the 1930s on the National Committee to Defend the Scottsboro Boys, nine youngsters falsely accused of raping two white women on a freight train in northern Alabama. Virginia Durr recalled his panic: "He kept saying over and over again, 'Rosa, the white folks will kill you.'" ⁴¹

Her quiet resolve prevailed. Having worked with her closely for a long time, Nixon was sure that—although he would never have foreseen it—she was the right person to serve as public symbol. She was well known and esteemed in the black community as activist and church worker, she was educated and articulate, and her character was unblemished—the ideal representative of black grievances and hopes. And it helped that she had a light complexion. "If ever there was a woman who was dedicated to the cause," Nixon recalled, "it was Rosa Parks." ⁴²

Later that night, attorney and part-time pastor Fred Gray, two weeks shy of twenty-five, told Jo Ann Robinson about Parks's arrest. They agreed that if they were ever to boycott the buses, this was the time. Robinson then talked with Nixon on the phone. They concurred that pursuing the slow-moving constitutional challenge should be reinforced by a boycott, initially for one day, that the Women's Political Council had long been mulling over and others had tried to start more than once. They set the boycott for Monday, December 5, the date of Parks's trial, to dramatize their grievance and demonstrate newfound black unity and determination.

Nixon placed a sheet of paper on his kitchen table, drew a rough sketch of the city, measuring distances with a slide rule. "I discovered nowhere in Montgomery at that time a man couldn't walk to work if he wanted to." He said to his wife: "We can beat this thing." ⁴³ While Nixon, knowing how things got done in the black world, wanted first

to enlist the backing of black ministers, Robinson and her WPC colleagues kicked off the bus boycott on their own. This time they would not let it be held back by more cautious leaders. She quickly typed up a half-page flyer on a stencil and around midnight drove to the Alabama State campus. She and a business professor stayed up the night covertly mimeographing thousands of copies. Next day, between and after classes, she and two trusted students delivered bundles to black neighborhoods, schools, and businesses.

Before he left on his Pullman run that morning, Nixon called the preachers. According to his recollection, activist Ralph Abernathy was enthusiastic but Martin King, one of the newest pastors in town, was hesitant.

“Brother Nixon,” he replied slowly, “let me think about it a while, and call me back.” When Nixon did so, he was supportive.

“I’m glad you agreed,” Nixon chuckled, “because I already set the meeting up to meet at your church,” which was also Robinson’s.⁴⁴ Later that day at Dexter Avenue Baptist, ministers joined with the WPC ladies, the Citizens Coordinating Committee, Progressive Democrats, and other black groups to prepare the Monday protest. On Sunday morning preachers pushed participation from their pulpits. The best publicity came from a front-page article in Sunday’s *Montgomery Advertiser*, intended to alert the white community.

Scarcely any African Americans rode the buses on Monday, December 5. Most walked to work or school, carpooled with friends, hitchhiked. Some rode farm tractors, mule wagons. Hundreds took taxis as black cabdrivers cut fares to the price of a bus ride. In the morning Parks appeared in Recorder’s Court with her supporters. Judge John B. Scott convicted her of violating the state (not city) segregation law and fined her fourteen dollars. Gray appealed the verdict as planned.

Awestruck by the boycott’s stunning success, eighteen leaders met in the afternoon at Mount Zion AME Zion Church, Parks’s church, and created a new organization, the Montgomery Improvement Association, to direct the protest. They elected officers, set up committees, and drew up an agenda for a preannounced mass meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church that night. Rufus Lewis nominated King, his pastor, for MIA president, and—getting over their surprise—participants elected

him without opposition. They chose him because he was known as a strong social gospel preacher—and because as a newcomer he was unencumbered by long-running quarrels and rivalries among his peers.

SEVERAL THOUSAND SOULS converged on spacious, newly restored Holt Street Baptist Church in a black working-class area, filling the sanctuary and basement two hours before the 7 P.M. starting time, tightly packing the aisles and entryway. Four or five thousand stood silently outside, listening to the meeting by loudspeakers. Those who found seats sang hymns and spirituals and prayed until the meeting began with singing of “Onward Christian Soldiers” and “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms.” When the mammoth audience stood to sing, King recalled, “the voices outside swelling the chorus in the church, there was a mighty ring like the glad echo of heaven itself.”⁴⁵ Then a rousing prayer by Rev. W. F. Alford, and a Scripture reading by U. J. Fields, a mid-twenties Korean War vet and pastor of Bell Street Baptist Church.

Fields read Psalm 34, David’s hymn of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, in which, as the Old Testament put it, he “pretended madness” before Abimelech, murderous king of Shechem, who expelled him. But what appeared as madness to the king was for David possession by the Spirit of God, which gave him an unearthly glow.

“I sought the Lord, and He heard me, and delivered me from all my fears. The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all.”⁴⁶

This was the radiant courage, Fields was saying, that black people had to wear before their white rulers. But what did it mean to fear God, in order to be delivered from all fears? It did not mean to cower before God but rather to feel reverential awe, to feel God’s presence within through the power of the holy spirit. This was the source of David’s radiance, as for all those whose light within was moving them to leave the buses. To many in the white community, black folks were acting crazy. Rather, in their own minds they were being glorified by their inner light. Fear of God removed human fear.

The featured speaker was the MIA's new president, a stranger to most people there. In this whirlwind day he'd had less than half an hour to prepare his address. His anxiety nearly paralyzing him, he had prayed for help.

"How could I make a speech," he had asked himself, glaring at blank note paper, "that would be militant enough to keep my people aroused to positive action, and yet moderate enough to keep this fervor within controllable and Christian bounds? I knew that many of the Negro people were victims of bitterness that could rise to flood proportions. What could I say to keep them courageous and prepared for positive action and yet devoid of hate and resentment? Could the militant and the moderate be combined in a single speech?"⁴⁷ The resolution of this dilemma, making this "the most decisive speech of my life," prefigured the moral quest that would define his ministry from that moment on.⁴⁸

After reviewing Rosa Parks's arrest and the black community's history of abuse on the buses, and sketching the national and global context in which they were acting, he declared baldly that "we are not wrong in what we are doing." If they were wrong, he insisted, the Supreme Court and the Constitution were wrong. Justice would be a lie and love have no meaning. If we are wrong, "God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to earth."

This last claim was the most absolute of all. If they were wrong, in other words, Jesus was no more than a naïve idealist, pontificator of lofty beatitudes—but not God's anointed messiah who took earthly form to redeem humanity from its wickedness. Jesus would be a fake. For black Baptists in particular this would be blasphemy. King was stepping out on the first of many trembling moral limbs. If their protest was wrong, he might as well give up not only the MIA presidency but his Baptist ministry, his whole faith. That's how sure he was, or convinced himself to be.

"We are determined here in Montgomery," he went on, "to work and fight until justice runs down like water (*Yes, applause*), and righteousness like a mighty stream (*Keep talking, applause*).

"We must keep God in the forefront. (*Yeah*) Let us be Christian in all

of our actions. (*That's right*) But I want to tell you this evening that it is not enough for us to talk about love. Love is one of the pivotal points of the Christian faith. There is another side called justice. And justice is really love in calculation. (*All right*) Justice is love correcting that which revolts against love. (*Well*)” He borrowed this formulation from theologian Paul Tillich, the subject of his doctoral dissertation. Then he upped the ante to cosmic heights.

“The Almighty God himself is not the God just standing out saying through Hosea, ‘I love you, Israel.’ He’s also the God that stands up before the nations and said: ‘Be still and know that I am God (*Yeah*), that if you don’t obey me I will break the backbone of your power (*Yeah*) and slap you out of the orbits of your international and national relationships.’ (*That's right*) Standing besides love is always justice, and we are only using the tools of justice. Not only are we using the tools of persuasion, but we’ve come to see that we’ve got to use the tools of coercion.”

After Rev. Abernathy read the boycott resolutions from the pulpit, the vast audience rose as one and with great cheering called out their resolve to continue the boycott “until some arrangement has been worked out” with the bus company.

When King returned to the pulpit after Parks was introduced and the resolutions ratified, he sharpened his words. They will face any consequences, he bellowed, as long as they get justice. As they struggle for their rights, some might die. But “if a man doesn’t have something that he’ll die for, he isn’t fit to live. (*enthusiastic applause*)”⁴⁹ Not only might some in this new crusade lose their lives, but if they weren’t willing to do so, they were not worthy of life.

Thus, as much as he might have intended to balance the absolute demand for justice with the tempering force of Christian love, and as much as he sought to subdue his rhetoric in his reconstruction of the speech in his memoir *Stride Toward Freedom*, in fact he failed to “combine the militant and the moderate.” It was, despite evocations of forbearance and compassion, an unabashed call for moral militancy, for unbridled moral courage, to attain God’s Truth. He did not utter the words *nonviolent* or *passive resistance*. He did not say the “weapon of love,” but the “weapon of protest.” He deployed violent imagery, speaking of an angry God slapping peoples around and breaking their

earthly power. He set no limits on how far justice might go in “correcting that which revolts against love.”

But the thirty-fourth Psalm Fields had recited promised that God would not harm those who were righteous, even as the divinity smashed to oblivion those who did evil, to the unforgiving extreme of cutting off “remembrance of them from the earth.” Like most black preaching through the ages, King’s sermon was inspired by the prophetic fire of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Jesus he invoked in this instance was not the beatific rabbi of the Sermon on the Mount, but the militant Christ of Revelation, fury overflowing.

What then was the “new meaning” that the morally courageous black people of Montgomery would inject into “the veins of history and of civilization”?⁵⁰ Above all, it was the power of unity in faith. Beginning on December 5, the participants in this saga learned that true democracy cannot bloom without deep community. The bus boycott exemplified an unparalleled solidarity across class and gender lines, the schooled and unschooled, literate and illiterate, Ph.D.s and “no D’s.” The driving force of it all was thousands of African-American women, middle class and working class, active in churches, clubs, and sororities. They transplanted democracy from their sheltered sanctuaries to public streets and squares. They turned faith and friendship from the healing balm of survival into the fire of defiance and transformation.

Montgomery’s black citizens understood, as did their nineteenth-century forebears who conquered slavery, that democracy meant that they “must themselves strike the blow.” They must act as their own agents of change. They would learn in the coming months that democracy was more than a right, more than a responsibility, but a pantheon of hope and faith. These citizens’ reach for democracy was rooted in the churches, scriptures, and spirituals that tied them to their divinity and to generations past and not yet born. They would make Montgomery a praying movement, a testament to their faith in God and, through God, faith in themselves. A testament to God’s grace.

Their Bibles and preachers taught them that they were God’s chosen people, like the children of Israel. The bus boycott consummated this faith, made it surge alive in mass meetings, car pools, and weary soulful walking. Every day, in their minds, they were moving toward the prom-

ised land. The mass church-based protest exalted them as makers of history, vehicles of the holy spirit. The sense of divine calling catapulted their self-esteem, their dignity, their collective self-confidence. They came to believe that they were building, through toil, sacrifice, and sharing, a “new Jerusalem” in Montgomery and “a new heaven and a new earth” in the dispirited South. Black people of Montgomery believed that they were breaking a new day.

3

The boycott leaders agreed upon three demands to the bus company: courteous treatment; a “first-come, first-serve” seating arrangement that would preserve segregation but without reserved sections (the Women’s Political Council had been pushing this proposal for two years); and hiring black bus drivers on predominantly Negro routes. Some leaders were willing to give up the last demand if they won the first two, but all thought the three demands were fair and reasonable—if anything, too accommodating. They expected a settlement within a few days.

The biracial Alabama Council on Human Relations (ACHR), which worked to improve race relations, arranged the first negotiating session between the MIA and city and bus company officials. On Thursday, December 8, the opposing sides met at Montgomery City Hall. King, Abernathy, Jo Ann Robinson, and eight others negotiated for the MIA. Mayor Gayle and commissioners Clyde Sellers and Frank Parks represented the city. Manager J. H. Bagley and counsel Jack Crenshaw spoke for Montgomery City Lines. The icy meeting was stiffened further by acts of violence: four buses had been fired on, and two black homes, including that of a Negro cop, were hit by shotgun blasts; no one was hurt. The meeting quickly deadlocked over the seating demand, which the officials insisted would be illegal—even though the parent bus company, based in Chicago, used that seating arrangement in Mobile and other Deep South cities.

Because press coverage might have contributed to the impasse,

Gayle convened a smaller group to talk in private. Still the four whites in the group were unyielding. From their perspective, of course, the black delegates were no less unyielding on the seating policy. The difference was that the black leaders, in their own eyes, had gone to the limit of compromise; any further and their constituents would likely have considered them to be selling out in the familiar tradition of “Uncle Tom” capitulation. They were already catching flak from Nixon and the NAACP for not opposing segregation outright. But the white officials probably felt the same about their constituents. Most white citizens were in no mood to compromise. Each side misread the other, partly out of mutual ignorance.

According to King’s account Crenshaw, “our most stubborn opponent,” admitted at the smaller meeting: “If we granted the Negroes these demands, they would go about boasting of a victory that they had won over the white people; and this we will not stand for.”⁵¹ The whites’ rigid stance stunned the MIA leaders and dashed their expectation that the protest would be short.

Not all of white Montgomery opposed the bus boycott, and many of those who did were impressed by the black community’s resolve. “They know after this,” Virginia Durr wrote a friend, “that they have a united group to deal with.”⁵² Montgomery native Juliette Morgan, librarian at the public library, was the fifth generation of female college graduates in her family; her great-great-grandmother had graduated in 1822, when women rarely attended college. Morgan, in her early forties, had written her first letter to the *Montgomery Advertiser* opposing segregation in June 1952, titled “‘White Supremacy’ Is Evil.” Now, one week into the boycott, she published an even more subversive letter to the editor. At a time when no one in the mass protest was thinking seriously about Mahatma Gandhi or nonviolence, she wrote about the 1930 boycott of the British salt monopoly that the Indian leader launched with his famous Salt March, and about the American boycott of British tea “that this nation was founded upon.” Montgomery’s black people “seem to have taken a lesson from Gandhi—and our own Thoreau, who influenced Gandhi. Their own task is greater than Gandhi’s, however, for they have greater prejudice to overcome.

“It is hard to imagine a soul so dead, a heart so hard, a vision so blinded and provincial as not to be moved with admiration at the quiet

dignity, discipline, and dedication with which the Negroes have conducted their boycott. Their cause and their conduct have filled me with great sympathy, pride, humility and envy. I envy their unity, their good humor, their fortitude, and their willingness to suffer for great Christian and democratic principles.” She called for an end to segregation.⁵³ Of course such verbal dynamite could not go unpunished. For months white people harassed her, even former friends. School kids threw rocks through her windows. The relentless hate campaign drove her to kill herself by an overdose of sleeping pills, the bus boycott’s only known death.

To provide alternative transportation, most of Montgomery’s hundred-plus black cab drivers cut rates to a dime, the bus fare. At the first negotiating session, Police Commissioner Sellers mentioned a city law requiring cab drivers to charge a minimum fare of forty-five cents, making it unaffordable—round-trip fare would cost two hours’ labor. Black cabs offered the bus fare until the police started citing them. Some circumvented the law by charging a group of riders the minimum fare. But even if all black cabs were commandeered for the cause, they could not have met the demand. Ten times as many workers and schoolchildren needed rides as the cabs could handle. They needed something on a grander scale.

The MIA transportation committee, led by Rufus Lewis and women activists, set in motion a car-pool system modeled on one used during a brief bus boycott in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in June 1953 that had won its modest demand (to enforce a new city law improving segregation) in ten days. For hands-on advice, King phoned an old family friend, noted Baptist preacher T. J. Jemison of Baton Rouge, an official of the National Baptist Convention, who had led the earlier boycott. The small army of drivers in Montgomery included ministers, shop owners, teachers, laborers, students, homemakers. Sedans, pickup trucks, and then a fleet of shiny, church-bought station wagons—1956 was the first big year for Detroit’s mass-marketed family wagon—collected passengers patiently lined up at forty-eight “dispatch stations.” Most of these were churches, where passengers could stay warm at dawn. Drivers returned them from forty-two “pick-up stations” after work or school. Hymns wafted lustily out car windows as these “rolling churches” criss-

crossed the city with what the segregationist White Citizens Council admitted was “military precision.”

Many preferred to walk, as much as twelve miles a day, to pound out their determination and hope. “I’m not walking for myself,” an elderly woman explained, turning down a ride, “I’m walking for my children and my grandchildren.” Another old woman, Mother Pollard, vowed to King that she would walk until it was over.

“But aren’t your feet tired?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, “my feet is tired, but my soul is rested.”⁵⁴

January 1956 opened a critical new phase of the bus boycott. As the new year dawned, MIA leaders and white officials held a fourth and final fruitless meeting. Heated debate flared in the *Montgomery Advertiser*, on the street, and in meeting rooms about whether a compromise was achievable, of what it might consist, and whether the protest was justified. The civic temper grew more and more polarized. A black cook complained in a letter to the editor: “Why is it a sin to ride the bus?” A white supporter wrote: “Here is one white ex-bus rider who would like to declare that as long as the boycott is on, it will be a dreary, rainy day, when I have a sprained ankle, and less than 45c cab fare, before I board one of those yellow rolling cell blocks again.”

Hill Lindsay bemoaned the Negroes’ ingratitude. His letter claimed that whites were responsible for every civilized advance they enjoyed. “You are indebted to the white people of Montgomery for life itself,” he hectored.

A white housewife declared it was time to stop pussyfooting around: “We housewives must quit being so lazy, get together and tell the help to either ride the buses and get to work on time or quit. We white people have tried to be understanding of our servants for years and I feel we were understanding until some outside influence put fear in them.

“We have been good to our Negroes,” her letter concluded, “but now is the time to make them understand a few things. We should quit paying taxi fare, quit going for them or taking them home, quit paying their Social Security tax, quit lending them money.”

Rev. U. J. Fields, MIA recording secretary, inflamed the climate and rankled his coworkers by telling the editor: “We have no intention of compromising. Such unwarranted delay in granting our request may

very well result in a demand for the annihilation of segregation which will result in complete integration.”⁵⁵

Day in and day out through the winter chill and rain, thousands of black citizens of all ages trod miles to work or school or rode in car pools along slippery streets.

Around 9 P.M. on Saturday, January 21, *Minneapolis Tribune* reporter Carl Rowan phoned King long-distance to ask about a wire-service teletype he had just received announcing that the bus dispute had been settled. That afternoon city commissioners had met with three black ministers not associated with the MIA. The meeting might have been initiated by the ministers, rankled at how the bus boycott had alienated them from the black community. Although they denied it later, the ministers apparently agreed to a compromise keeping reserved seats, even though they had no authority to do so. And while King and the MIA may have believed that a “settlement” had in fact been reached, they denounced it as a hoax by the commissioners. It proved to be a hoax only in the sense that it was illegitimate and patently unrepresentative of, and unaccountable to, the black community’s general will.

Rowan recalled of his phone call that King “was startled to hear of the phony announcement. He came to the same conclusion that I did: the whites had bought, cajoled, or threatened three blacks, the assumption being that if the mass of blacks could be tricked into going back aboard the buses, it would be almost impossible to get the boycott going again.” King and other leaders frantically called dozens of volunteers, who ran all over town crying out, “No matter what you hear or read, the boycott is not over. Please do not go back onto the buses.”⁵⁶

Late into the cold Saturday night King and Abernathy visited bars, poolrooms, and nightclubs—new to King but not to his worldly pal—to deny the bogus settlement. King delighted the drunk patrons, many his own age, by his pool-playing finesse. In one dark club someone shouted, “Just let us know who they were, we’ll hang ‘em.” King smiled in recounting this at the next executive board meeting. It seemed to be the common mood they encountered in darker black Montgomery.

“We can’t hurt Uncle Toms by violence,” he admonished his colleagues, “but only by mass action.”⁵⁷ At this meeting he defended himself against scurrilous white accusations. His fellows gave him a vote of

confidence. The three apostate preachers publicly repudiated the settlement. The boycott did not lose a beat.

Leaders knew that humiliated city officials would have to strike back—hard. The commissioners announced a “get tough” policy to end the boycott. It included pressuring housewives not to chauffeur their servants, and stepped up harassment of car-pool drivers, stopped by police for contrived or trivial offenses. And no further talks with the MIA until the protest ended. Mayor Gayle stressed that this boycott led by “Negro radicals” was about much more than bus seating: “What they are after,” he warned, “is the destruction of our social fabric.”⁵⁸ To underscore their resolve, all three commissioners joined the Montgomery chapter of the White Citizens Council.

On January 26 police arrested King, driving in the car pool that afternoon, for alleged speeding (30 m.p.h. in a 25 m.p.h. zone) and jailed him for the first time. On the long, circuitous ride to the city jail, the handcuffed preacher was terrified that the cops were delivering him to a waiting lynch mob. He had lived in the city for a year and a half and didn’t yet know where the jail was located, notwithstanding Jesus’ directive to visit those behind bars.

“I found myself trembling within and without,” he recalled. “Silently, I asked God to give me the strength to endure whatever came.

“We turned into a dark and dingy street that I had never seen and headed under a desolate old bridge. I was sure now that I was going to meet my fateful hour on the other side.” He found himself relieved to arrive at the jail, where he was placed in a smelly overcrowded cell with several other blacks. He was appalled: “men lying on hard wood slats, and others resting on cots with torn-up mattresses. The toilet was in one corner of the cell without a semblance of an enclosure.”⁵⁹ His jailers were unwilling to release him, but finally relented when a furious black crowd gathered outside; they couldn’t get him out the door fast enough. In the darkness he saw a radiant star of unity.⁶⁰ That night the MIA ran several mass meetings out of concern for their leader.

Next afternoon a neatly dressed store maid in her mid-thirties, wearing a cap and jacket, was interviewed by Willie Lee, a young black researcher from Fisk University in Nashville who was giving her a ride home.

“I’m so mad I don’t know what to do,” the dark-skinned protester burst out. “Do you know those bastards put Reveren’ King in jail last night. They think they bad ’cause they got guns, but I sho hope they know how to use ’em, ’cause if they don’t, I’ll eat ’em up with my razor. If they can use ’em, they bet not come up on me and hit me, ’cause he’ll never use it then ’cause he’ll be in pieces so fast he won’t know what hit ’em.”

“Before the people stopped riding the buses,” Lee asked her, “did you ever have to get up and stand so white people could sit down?”

“Yeah, that happen almost every day,” she answered. “But let me tell you about this. One morning I got on the bus and I had a nickel and five pennies. I put the nickel in and showed him the five pennies. You know how they do you. You put five pennies in there, and they say you didn’t. And do you know that bastard cussed me out. He called me bastards, whores, and when he called me motherfucker, I got mad and I put my hand on my razor. I looked at him and told him, ‘Your mammy was a son-of-a-bitch, that’s why she had you a bitch. And if you so bad, git up outta that seat.’ I rode four blocks, then I went to the front door and backed off the bus, and I was jest hoping he’d git up. I was going to cut his head slump off, but he didn’t sey nothing.

“Dey started this thang, and now they can’t finish it. They didn’t have a bitter need to ’rest Miss Park. All they had to do was talk to ’er lack she was a lady, but they had to be so big and take her to jail. Dey bit the lump off and us making ’em chew it. I know ole Sellers, ole dog, wish he could spit.

“But God fix ’em,” she rapped on, “all colored folks ain’t like they use to be. They ain’t scared no more. Guns don’t scare us. These white folks jest keep messing up. Dey gona have a war if they keep on. We be jest forced to kill ’em all ’cause if they hurt Rev. King, I don’t mine dying, but I sho Lord am taking a white bastard with ’em. If I don’t have my razor with me, I’ll use a stick.

“You can do anything for ’em, but jest don’t set beside ’em. Now you know it ain’t no harm in that. I don’t wont they no good men ’cause a white man can’t do nothing fur me. Give me a black man any day. And I never worry ’bout any no good white bitch taking a man o’ mine. She ain’t woman ’nough to take ’em.”

If the bus boycott ended, she told Lee, “I’m gona walk that mile still. If they git another dime from me, I won’t know it. Well this is my stop. Let’s hold out and pray, and I know we’ll get what we wont.”

Lee recorded similar angry sentiments at a car-pool dispatch station where protesters were waiting for rides to work.

“I’ll crawl on my knees ’fo I git back on dem buses,” a domestic worker exclaimed to a friend. “Look at dem red bastards over der watching us”—she pointed to the cops—“Ain’t nobody scared of dem.”

“I ain’t ’bout to get on dem buses,” another woman said. “Des white folks gona mess right ’round here and git killed. I don’t mind dying but I sho take one of dem with me. God done got fed up wid des white folks. We kin stand hard time betterin dey kin ’cause us use to it and dey ain’t.”

If “dat son-of-a-bitch I work fur” threatened to fire her for not riding the bus, the first domestic said sternly, furrowing her brow, “I beat her skinny ass and tell ’er keep de money ’cause I ain’t hongry. Did you see ’em when they put dat boy in jail?” referring to King.

“Dey jest trying to skere us back on dem buses,” the other replied, “but I’ll be damn if I get on one. I’ll walk twenty miles ’fo I ride ’em. Dey trying to be smart, but if dey beat dat boy dere is going to be hell to pay.”

The researcher picked up other random comments at the dispatch station: “Dey got dem guns but us ain’t skered,” one woman said. Another woman: “Dey bet not come in our neighborhood by de self.” A third protester: “Some of ’em gona mess right ’round here and get killed.” A fourth woman said somberly, “I ain’t got but one time to die and I may as well die fur somethin’.”⁶¹

That night, after a day fraught with chilling phone calls—a white friend warned him about a plot to kill him—King spoke at a mass meeting to reassure the black community that he was all right, that he had not been mistreated in jail. “I attempted to convey an overt impression of strength and courage,” he recalled, “although I was inwardly depressed and fear-stricken.”⁶² His off-the-cuff words betrayed his thinly veiled terror:

“If one day you find me sprawled out dead, I do not want you to retaliate with a single act of violence.”⁶³ The audience froze in silent

dread. After the meeting, seventy-two-year-old Mother Pollard, the tireless walker, called him over. He hugged her warmly.

“Son, what’s wrong with you? You didn’t talk strong tonight.”

“Oh, no, Sister Pollard, nothing is wrong,” he lied. “I am feeling as fine as ever.”

“You can’t fool me,” she replied. “I knows something is wrong. Is it that we ain’t doing things to please you? Or is it that the white folks is bothering you?”

“Everything is going to be all right, Sister Pollard.”

She looked straight into his chocolate eyes. “Now, I don told you we is with you all the way.” Her face radiated serenity. “Now, even if we ain’t with you, the Lord is with you. God’s gonna take care of you.” As she spoke these comforting words, King later wrote, “everything in me quivered and quickened with the pulsing tremor of raw energy.”⁶⁴ The Spirit was warming his bones.

Around midnight, as he struggled to sleep, the phone rang one more time. “Listen, nigger,” an ugly voice crackled over the wire, “we’re tired of you and your mess now. If you aren’t out of this town in three days, we’re going to blow your brains out and blow up your house.” He paced the bedroom floor in angry fear, then walked across the hall to the kitchen and heated some coffee. He tried to find solace in what philosophy and theology had taught him about the meaning of evil. Could there be good without evil? Could there be redemption without sin? No answer came to shake his despair. Nothing relieved the fear in his gut. He was ready to give up.

“I got to the point that I couldn’t take it any longer,” he recalled in a sermon the summer before his death. “I was weak. Something said to me you can’t call on Daddy now,” as he had in past troubles. “You can’t even call on Mama now. (*My Lord*) You’ve got to call on that something in that person that your daddy used to tell you about. (*Yes*) That power that can make a way out of no way. (*Yes*)” He had to call on the holy spirit’s power to help him through. The church had been so much his home all of his young life that he had never stepped outside of it far enough, or boldly enough, to forge his own relationship with God, with Jesus, with the Spirit—not that of his father or mother or Ebenezer Baptist in Atlanta.

He discovered at this midnight hour that “religion had to become real to me”—not merely the hand-me-down family business—“and I had to know God for myself. (Yes, sir) With my head in my hands, I bowed down over that cup of coffee. Oh yes, I prayed a prayer. I prayed out loud that night. (Yes) The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory:

“Lord, I’m down here trying to do what’s right. (Yes) I think I’m right. I think the cause that we represent is right. (Yes) But Lord, I must confess that I’m weak now. I’m faltering. I’m losing my courage. (Yes) I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership. I can’t let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak. (Yes) I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.”

“At that moment,” he continued, “I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. I could hear an inner voice saying to me, (Yes) Martin Luther, (Yes) stand up for righteousness, (Yes) stand up for justice, (Yes) stand up for truth. (Yes) And lo, I will be with you, (Yes) even until the end of the world. I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No, never alone. No, never alone. He promised never to leave me, (Never) never to leave me alone.”⁶⁵

A branch shall grow out of his roots, spoke Isaiah. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of Wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.

I have put My Spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles. He will bring forth justice for truth. He will not fail nor be discouraged, till he has established justice in the earth.

Then Jesus, when he had been baptized, came up from the water. And behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven.⁶⁶

Birmingham civil rights activist Pinkie Franklin heard about the bombing of King's home, three days later, the morning after. She couldn't sleep that night. Like many supporters far and wide, she wrote King a letter to help strengthen him. Forty years old, the Alabama State College graduate, born in Selma, had been a schoolteacher and for ten years had owned a Birmingham grocery store with her husband.

"For years," she wrote him, "we Negro Mothers of the Southland have prayed that God would send us a leader such as you are. Now that the Almighty has regarded our lowly estate and has raised you up among us, I am indeed grateful.

"Be assured that day and night without ceasing I shall be praying for your safety and that of your family's. The Arm of God is everlastingly strong and Sufficient to keep you and yours. There shall no harm come to you, and the Comforting Spirit of God shall guide you."

She closed her letter, "A fellow Suffer, (Mrs.) Pinkie S. Franklin of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church."⁶⁷ Her own church would be bombed on a Sunday morning seven and a half years later, killing four young girls dressing up for the Lord.

Birmingham, the big industrial city a hundred miles north of Montgomery, had already racked up such a fearsome record of bombings by the Ku Klux Klan that it had earned the nickname "Bombingham." A frequently targeted middle-class black neighborhood was called "Dyna-

mite Hill” because so many black homes had been blown up. The “Big Mules,” iron and steel magnates who dominated this American Johannesburg, were determined to preserve Jim Crow by any means necessary in order to keep the industrial work force divided and weakened.

Their man in city hall, ambitious police commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor, gave the green light to Robert “Dynamite Bob” Chambliss and other Ku Klux Klan members who had mastered the use of dynamite in northern Alabama mines and quarries they had labored in. They were not apprehended for the rash of bombings. Was a similar pattern taking hold in Montgomery? Evidence later showed that city officials might have known in advance about some bombings of churches and parsonages. Montgomery was the first place where ministers were bombed.

Just before the attack on King’s home, MIA leaders had secretly shifted course, a move that would change the course of history. Among many reasons black Montgomerians hated segregation was the conviction, reaffirmed daily, that it could never be equitable or fair. In December and January they had experienced publicly, as a unified community, what most already knew in their bones: legalized segregation could never be but white supremacy, naked or veiled. It could not be fixed by cosmetic touch-ups.

The authorities “did not do what we wanted done,” attorney Fred Gray later reflected. “When that became apparent, then the question is, ‘how long are we gonna stay off the buses?’ People have to look forward to something. And the logical thing is to stay off the buses until we can return to them on an integrated basis. Because they wouldn’t give us the smaller things, we go for the larger and the only way we can go for that, and I knew it, was a federal suit.”⁶⁸

The dynamics of the mass protest taught participants that they finally had no recourse but to challenge the constitutionality of bus segregation—encouraged, of course, by the Supreme Court’s recent *Brown* decisions overturning the *Plessy v. Ferguson* doctrine of “separate but equal.” Officials subverted their own segregation laws when they refused to enforce them fairly yet hid behind and manipulated them to preserve the unsustainable status quo. The movement spawned an efficient car-pool operation that might have grown into a full-fledged system of

public transport. But when the city commission refused to bend on reserved sections (partly to preserve the fiction of equal treatment), renewed the bus company's franchise, and denied the MIA proposal for its own jitney service, they closed off any possibility of a "separate but equal" solution and made bus desegregation inescapable.

Toward the end of January Gray spent a few days in New York conferring with Thurgood Marshall and other top NAACP lawyers to prepare the ground for a federal lawsuit. It was a delicate situation for the MIA. While they needed NAACP expertise and money, over which tension had already surfaced, the NAACP's name and reputation in the white South were mud—only slightly less sullied than those of the Communist Party. Many white southerners saw them as one and the same, the way black people conflated the White Citizens Council and the Ku Klux Klan.

The pivotal meeting of the MIA executive board took place on Monday, January 30—the afternoon before the bombing attack on King's home. It was the eighth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination in New Delhi. While remotely possible that a spy's report on the meeting triggered the bombing, most likely the attack had already been planned for that night with no link to this meeting. The midnight January 27 phone call had given King three days to leave town. The three days were up.

Participants were sworn to secrecy at this meeting. "It is *very* important," King stressed, "that this information does not leak out about the NAACP and the court action until it's printed in the newspaper. We want to surprise the whites." Surprise was a key element of nonviolent combat, like every other kind.

Opening with prayer, the specially called meeting dealt first with a proposal by Rev. Alford to accept a compromise tendered by the city that would keep a smaller number of reserved seats. The general feeling was that it didn't come close. But many ministers were tired and frustrated—though they had not been walking—and sought a graceful way out. King was ambivalent but swayed by the foot soldiers' fervency.

"I've seen along the way," King commented, "where some of the ministers are getting weary"; he said he wouldn't mention any names.

If you think that Negroes “should go back under the same conditions, we won’t ostracize you. We should iron it out here.”

Alford took up the challenge. “There’s a time in the life of any crisis,” he argued, “when you ought to be reasonable.” The leaders would have been willing to give up, for now, the demand for black bus drivers. It was the fairer seating arrangement, a more civil if not quite civilized segregation, that they would not budge on. Nothing could have been more “reasonable.”

“From my limited contact,” King countered, “if we went tonight and asked the people to get back on the bus, we would be ostracized. They wouldn’t get back. I believe to the bottom of my heart that the majority of Negroes would ostracize us. They are willing to walk.”

What did he mean by “ostracize”? He worried that the aroused mass following might repudiate the current leaders, replace them with others more militant, more responsive to the people’s will, perhaps advocates of violent tactics.

He then turned to the federal lawsuit about to be filed. This constitutional challenge to city and state bus segregation laws would not be brought formally by NAACP lawyers, he explained, but rather by five female plaintiffs, including Claudette Colvin, now sixteen, who had just given birth to her baby son, Raymond. The lawyers estimated that the lawsuit would be decided by the Montgomery federal court within three weeks.

“We need to train people to go back to the bus,” the Reverend Seay urged. “We would disgrace ourselves before the world if we give up now.” Feeling strong pressure from below, the leaders resolved to continue the boycott. They hoped that the daily civic disruption and media spotlight would penetrate the minds and hearts of the federal judges holding court in the boycott’s epicenter.

“By the way,” King disclosed, “I’ve found out that the Negro lady who was beat up by a Negro man a few days ago is the cook for the mayor. She attends the mass meetings and tells the mayor what happened the next morning. We also found out that Sellers has let three Negro prisoners attend the mass meetings so that they can tell him what has happened.”

Gray pitched for one or two respected gentlemen to join the five women as plaintiffs.

“I think it is very important in throwing sentiment our way,” King pleaded, “if we have a minister as a plaintiff. Who will volunteer?” he asked the two dozen men of cloth. We cannot know whether he or Abernathy would have been willing to sign up, but it was evident to all that they were too central as leaders. No one raised his hand. A few ministers claimed that they were acting for their parishioners but were not personally aggrieved. Many like King had never ridden the bus. The meeting ended with prayer—and only women as plaintiffs.⁶⁹ The men of cloth had feet of clay.

Two nights after King’s home was bombed, dynamite thrown from a passing car exploded in E. D. Nixon’s yard, causing little damage but sending a strong message. His wife told him about it when his train from Chicago pulled into Birmingham the next morning.

King had gone to the sheriff’s office to request firearm permits for himself and his bodyguards, but the application was rejected. On February 2, King, Abernathy, Gray, and Jo Ann Robinson met with the Alabama governor in his capitol office a block from King’s church. A populist politician in the mold of Louisiana’s fabled Huey Long, “Big Jim” Folsom was the most racially liberal governor in the South. He had set off a brouhaha three months before (and probably wrecked his career) when he drank Scotch in his governor’s mansion with New York’s black congressman, Adam Clayton Powell Jr.—and had him chauffeured around town in his limousine. He was noncommittal when King asked for state police protection from white violence. What King wanted most was what the sheriff had just denied him.

“What we would like to have is to have you issue a permit to keep a gun in my car.”⁷⁰ He deemed armed protection worth a private meeting with the governor. Supportive of the protest in principle, its ends if not its means, Folsom declined to help him with his personal need. The parley revealed the naked fear King felt—his nascent premonition of death.

*We are not of those who shrink back from destruction, the writer of Hebrews declared, but of those who believe to the preservation of the Spirit.*⁷¹

THERE WAS NO ATTACK on Fort Sumter or outright secession, but southerners both black and white saw signs of a second Civil War. Even official vocabulary reprised the rhetoric that led to the War Between the States. On January 24, the day after Gayle announced the city's get-tough policy, the governors of Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi vowed to resist the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision through "interposition." The Alabama legislature, like others, enacted a statute of "nullification." There was no Lincoln in the White House, only a southern-born war hero who personally opposed *Brown*. No Jefferson Davis conspiring with fellow secessionists in Montgomery, "Cradle of the Confederacy," but another Mississippi senator of far lesser stature, James Eastland, exhorting his followers to hold the line against "mongrelization" of the races.

The 1956 equivalent of Fort Sumter—less destructive but no less menacing—broke out on Monday, February 6, in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, an hour and a half's drive northwest of the capital. Autherine Lucy, twenty-six, was the tenth child of tenant farmers in Shiloh, in Alabama's fertile Black Belt, where she had helped her family grow cotton, watermelon, sweet potatoes, and peanuts. Ever since getting her undergraduate degree from all-black Miles College in 1952, the Birmingham secretary had fought to be admitted to the University of Alabama as its first openly black student. NAACP lawyers took up her case a year before the *Brown* decision; in June 1955 a federal judge forced her admission. A month prior, the Supreme Court's delayed enforcement decree had mandated school desegregation "by all deliberate speed." The university stalled with an unsuccessful appeal, then announced on January 30, the day King's house was bombed, that Lucy could register for spring semester. Next week she enrolled for graduate study in library science.

As school officials escorted her to class the first two days, she encountered angry protests. Fiery crosses burned on campus three nights in a row. On Friday and Saturday evening a thousand protesters marched on the home of the university's president, Oliver Cromwell Carmichael. His wife was hit by a flying egg. On Monday, February 6,

the growing mob of incensed students and townspeople were joined by a large phalanx of rubber workers from the nearby Goodrich tire factory. Heading to her first morning class, Lucy, together with the dean of women and a male administrator, were pelted by eggs, rocks, and mud balls. The protesters called the officials “nigger-lovin’ bastards” and screamed “Keep ’Bama White!” Several tried to break into her classroom. When Lucy and her escorts escaped by the back door, they were ambushed by the vicious mob, shrieking, “Let’s kill her! Let’s kill her!” Miraculously, they managed to drive away, rocks smashing the back window. The police were lying low; they made three arrests.

The rioting crowd multiplied during the day. By nightfall they were joined by high school students and rubber workers from the day shift. A mob estimated at three thousand marauded around campus and again besieged the president’s house. State police repulsed them, firing tear gas, never before used on a college campus. It was the first organized violence on an American campus in two decades; the first time that school desegregation had brought rioting anywhere in the South. A report to Governor Folsom revealed that rioters intended to kill Lucy. Many of the militant rubber workers were members of the Klan, which drew its shock troops, like “Dynamite Bob” Chambliss, from the exploited white working class.

During the Monday rioting the university board of trustees met in emergency session. Dismissing entreaties by moderate faculty and students against “mob rule,” the trustees suspended Lucy. “They did it because the mob forced them to,” a student leader told *Time*. “The mob won.”⁷² Three weeks later the trustees expelled her, a move applauded by the White Citizens Council and whites generally. ’Bama stayed white for seven more years, until another governor, a protégé of Big Jim Folsom, made a last stand at the schoolhouse door in Tuscaloosa.

The Oconee River wound southward, cutting a valley through pine-forested hills of central Georgia, seventy miles east of Atlanta, then widened into Lake Oconee. In this pine river valley, in the village of Penfield, in November 1846, Willis Williams, thirty-six, joined Shiloh Baptist Church, a racially mixed congregation of fifty whites and twenty-eight slaves founded in 1795. He was owned by another Willis Williams, one of the county's most prosperous slaveholders, who joined the church later, perhaps through his namesake's influence.

Two years after joining up, slave Williams was convicted of theft by a biracial church committee and expelled. Two months later, in October 1848, church minutes reported that "Willis, servant to Bro. W. N. Williams, came forward and made himself confession of his guilt and said that the Lord had forgiven him for his error. He was therefore unanimously received into fellowship with us."⁷³ His redemption augured his conversion into a zealous slave preacher, or "exhorter." He devoted himself to preaching the Word among Greene County slaves and brought many families into the Baptist fold, which after the Civil War split into segregated congregations.

By turn of the century his son Adam Daniel Williams, endowed with a double dose of Old Testament namesake—and his twin sister was Eve—had emerged as a prominent black Baptist preacher in Atlanta. His daddy had taught him his calling as a young boy, growing up in the

wake of the Civil War, when he reveled in preaching the funerals of “snakes, cats, dogs, horses or any thing that died. The children of the community would call him to preach the funeral and they would have a big shout.”⁷⁴ His daughter, Alberta Christine, married a young backwoods Georgia preacher, like he himself had started out. Michael and Alberta King’s first son, namesake of Martin Luther, entered the earthly kingdom on January 15, 1929.⁷⁵

When Willis Williams preached the gospel in the mid-nineteenth century, black Christianity was only two or three generations removed from its African roots. Many older slaves, perhaps Williams’s parents or grandparents, had grown up in the African Spirit world of ancestor worship and nature gods, whether in their homeland or transplanted in the New World. They heard and passed on tales of African spirits and saints, both good and evil. Stories were sung and danced as well as spoken. A favorite sacred ritual was the “ring shout”—slaves danced and called out in a circle to embody the ties between past, present, and future.

Mixing up African beliefs and practices with Christian language and ritual, slave spirituality served as the driving force of all aspects of the slave community. Slaves shaped it anew to meet their needs and ensure their survival and salvation.

The gift of African-American Christianity to the Christian religion, and ultimately to all the world’s faiths, was the magic of intimate interplay with the divine. This was not to imply that mainstream Christianity (as well as Judaism and Islam) did not already worship a personal God, but that black Christians, perhaps most like Muslims, staked their faith on divine intimacy. Other believers tended to keep God at arm’s length, as a general rule, despite lip service to the contrary (or, like many Catholics, saved their intimate devotion for the Virgin Mary or a personal saint).

Black people’s divine intimacy varied in form. It was often intensely emotional. It was a felt connection with a God not only of emotion, but at times of raw passion and physicality. Just as their West African ancestors had conversed directly with their nature gods and ancestral spirits, so did enslaved African Americans commune with their divinity on a horizontal as much as a vertical basis.

As one slave put it, “Gwine to argue with de father and chatter wid the son.” Another said simply, “Our God talks to his children.”⁷⁶

From slavery time to twentieth-century gospel singing, African Americans have nourished a special intimacy with Jesus, or with God through Jesus, God as Jesus—both called Lord without distinction. Spirituals, and later on gospel and blues, expressed the connection with Jesus in ways that words alone could not.

*Sometimes I hangs my head an' cries,
But Jesus goin' to wipe my weep'n eyes.
He pluck my feet out'n de miry clay,
He set dem on de firm rock of ages.*⁷⁷

No song conveyed this intimate relationship with more feeling than Thomas Dorsey's gospel classic, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand"—Martin King's favorite song, sung at his funeral in Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church.

W. E. B. Du Bois's encounter as a young man with the "frenzy" of Deep South black religion left a searing imprint on his consciousness. It was the core event around which he constructed his 1903 masterpiece, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

A "suppressed terror hung in the air and seemed to seize us," he recalled, "a pythian madness, a demoniac possession, that lent terrible reality to song and word. The people moaned and fluttered, and then the gaunt-cheeked brown woman beside me suddenly leaped straight in the air and shrieked like a lost soul, while round about came wail and groan and outcry, and a scene of human passion such as I had never conceived before."

The frenzy, or shouting, "when the Spirit of the Lord passed by, and, seizing the devotee, made him mad with supernatural joy" varied from "the silent rapt countenance or the low murmur and moan to the mad abandon of physical fervor—the stamping, shrieking, and shouting, the rushing to and fro and wild waving of arms, the weeping and laughing, the vision and the trance."

So solid a hold did it have on the rural Negro, the scholar activist concluded, "that many generations firmly believed that without this visible manifestation of God there could be no true communion with the Invisible."⁷⁸

The term *spirit possession* pinpointed the physical, forceful quality of the divine interaction in African-American Christianity. The divine

spirit invaded the human bodysoul, but only when it opened itself. The human vessel, male or female, was not a passive receptacle. It passionately clutched the spirit force with its whole physical and emotional being, possessing the spirit from within just as it was being seized from without.

“All night long I’ve been feelin’ ’im,” Georgia slave Mary Gladdys described an all-night prayer meeting. “Jest befo’ day, I feels ’im. Jest befo’ day, I feels ’im. The sperit, I feels ’im. The sperit, I feels ’im!”⁷⁹ Another testified: “I got Him! I hold him here all the time!”

That this spiritual intercourse corresponded, more than symbolically, with female worshipers’ experience of sexual intercourse, and that Christians believed that God impregnated a flesh-and-blood woman, often lent women’s spiritual expressions an erotic undertone—as, for example, gospel singers’ cry to Jesus or the holy spirit to “fill me up!” Communicating one-to-one with divine force through prayer, song, rapture, or frenzy opened the gateway between the profane and sacred worlds.

For the slaves and for generations of descendants, the omnipresent Spirit world translated into the experience of what Christians called the holy spirit. If God was the transcendental Supreme Being and Jesus the incarnate personality who sacralized the cosmos, the Word becoming flesh, the Spirit was the divine force itself manifested on earth, and thus the spark of divinity, or “inner light,” that glorified each creature. Of course the three persons of the Trinity were really One, viewed from different angles on earth.

Holy spirit, breath of God, wind of the cosmos was the life energy that flowed through beings either as acts of grace or as invoked or conjured by believers. The Spirit, which generated and protected sacred time and space amid the travails of ordinary life, was the force that simultaneously emancipated and unified those who embodied it. Liberated them from sin, evil, forces of darkness, mortality itself. Unified them into a chain, a cosmic arc of relationship and interdependence, an “inescapable network of mutuality.” Above all, the Spirit expressed the content of the relationship between humans and God, the substance of things unseen—the relationship, as Jewish theologian Martin Buber put it, between I and Thou. This relationship was made of love.